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Exploring the Institutionalisation of an Ethic of Care in Outbound Mobility Programs

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A primary mechanism for implementation of policy on global education has been investment in outbound mobility programs that enable university students to engage in university-sponsored global educational travel. Recently, these programs have proliferated under government funding schemes, such as the New Colombo Plan and Endeavour Mobility Grants in Australia, and the Lincoln Commission in the United States.

Research suggests that effective, university-sponsored global educational travel can yield substantial changes in the global competencies of students in a relatively short period. The transformative impacts of such experiences have been linked to “trigger events” and “fateful moments,” whereby experiential learning while abroad can be identity changing. Thus, the effect of such experiences shifts the focus for young people from the smaller world in which they live to the broader global landscape. This shift is considered an essential step in becoming a socially responsible and globally aware global citizen.

As a result of the assumed efficiencies of short-term programs and their impact on young people, there has been a shift away from traditional full-semester study abroad programs to short-term mobility programs. Short-term programs vary in length from a week to several weeks in length, and include a wide array of learning activity types including study and cultural immersion tours, international work integrated learning experiences, service learning and volunteering activities. One of the significant differences between earlier forms of global mobility and the emergence of these short-term programs is the involvement of academic staff from the home institution. During short-term outbound mobility programs, it is commonplace for academic staff to accompany students and to be responsible for their pastoral care. Thus, as well as playing a key role in organising program logistics, academic staff travel with the students, conduct classes in the field and, importantly for this paper, act as role models, supervisors and providers of emotional support for students.

This presentation explores this largely hidden feature of short-term mobility programs. Specifically, we propose that an ethic of care practiced by predominantly female and often junior academic staff who typically accompany and lead students on these short mobility programs is becoming more institutionalized and is now an essential but overlooked feature of this growing phenomena.

This presentation uses interview data from eight academic staff from Australia and the United States who have led several short-term mobility programs, as well as data from the reflective journals of student participants. Our aim is to explore how gendered roles associated with nurturing play an important function in providing students the sense of security necessary for them engage with new cultural experiences in unfamiliar contexts. We argue that part of this security stems from a pseudo parent-child relationship that is reinforced by both students and staff and, to some extent, the higher education institutions they represent. This shift from teacher to parent mode is explored and we examine how these sometimes conflicting roles are negotiated and reconciled.

We conclude that global citizenship produced through new forms of educational travel is, in part, a product of invisible gendered labour. Implications for practice are explored, as are opportunities for further research.